

# Christian Apologetics

## Removing Stumbling Blocks to Belief

### ***Reasons to Believe: The Place of Reason in Christian Faith***

Contrary to widespread prejudice, there are many reasonable grounds for believing in God. This address argues that belief in God is supported, not undermined, by the proper use of reason and by the very structure of reasoning itself.

### ***Someone Out There? Evidence for the Existence of a Personal God***

Twentieth century scientific research has gathered an overwhelming body of evidence, from the origin and fine-tunedness of the universe, for the existence of an intelligent and caring God.

### ***Scent of a Distant Flower: The Gospel and our Search for God***

Dissatisfaction is a feature of our human condition. This message relates this sense of unfulfilment to our basic need for God.

### ***The Search for Truth: The Relevance of the Incarnation***

A central Christian belief is that the Son of God became a human being like us. This sermon illustrates from three distinguished writers, how this belief gives meaning to life and hope amid suffering

### ***Where Is God When it Hurts? Human Suffering and the Death of Jesus***

Suffering is not just an intellectual difficulty for faith in God. It is a tragic, cruel and intensely personal reality in human experience. This message discusses the problem of suffering in the light of Jesus' crucifixion and what it shows of God's solidarity with all who suffer.

### ***The Phoenix and the Butterfly: Human Longings for the Resurrection***

The desire for immortality is a universal human longing. This message relates these longings to the central Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. Analogies in nature help us understand the glorious transformation that awaits us in the resurrection

# Reasons to Believe: The Place of Reason in Christian Faith

Rob Yule, 1995

Contrary to widespread prejudice, there are many reasonable grounds for believing in God. This address, the first in a series on 'Christian Apologetics', given at a morning service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 10 September 1995, argues that belief in God is supported, not undermined, by the proper use of reason and by the very structure of reasoning itself.

## Faith and Reason

The relationship of faith and reason has often been controversial. As early as the third century the Church father Tertullian asked, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem, the academy with the church?' Many Christians today - even professional Christians and Christian students - have a view of faith that is essentially irrational. Their professional life or studies are in one compartment, their faith in another. This anti-intellectual stance has important practical consequences, because unthinking Christians often do things that are mindless or whacky, hold attitudes that put others off from becoming Christians, are ill-equipped to explain Christian faith to interested enquirers, and abandon intellectual and public life to secularists.

In actual fact, there are strong Biblical grounds for affirming reason and rationality:

- Jesus told us to love God with all our mind as well as all our heart (Matthew 22:37, thus endorsing the *Shema*, the Jewish confession of faith, Deuteronomy 6:5).
- Paul said that the offering our bodies to God was not an irrational or foolish act but our 'reasonable worship' (*logikos*, a logical act in accordance with true goal of our lives), to be accomplished by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1).
- Peter urged us always to be ready to answer unbelievers or enquirers who ask us 'to give the reason' for the hope we have and the faith we hold (1 Peter 3:15).
- The supreme biblical affirmation of the place of reason is the Prologue of John's Gospel, where the Stoic or neo-Platonist term *logos* ('word', 'reason') is applied to the pre-existent Son of God through whom everything was created in the beginning and who enlightens every human being born into the world (John 1:1-4, 9). Here the Logos is the principle which unifies all reality and renders that reality intelligible to us.

Christians can use reason in two ways. Firstly to provide evidence for the truth of the Christian faith. Secondly to show shortcomings or inconsistencies in the views of non-believers. The former approach is positive or constructive apologetics. The latter is negative or critical apologetics. The first shows the reasonableness of Christian faith, the second shows the foolishness of unbelief.

## 1. The Reasonableness of Faith

Historically there have been three classical rational arguments for the existence of God and the truth of the Christian faith. Here I concentrate on the reasonableness or rational character of these arguments, to show that faith is supported, not undermined, by the proper use of reason.

### i) The Argument from Causality

Every effect requires a cause. Our minds are so constituted that it is rational to deduce causes from consequences, and illogical to deny it. The entire criminal system rests on this assumption. (Here is a corpse; explain how it was killed. An aircraft crashed on Mt. Erebus; explain how it came to be there). This is called the *Cosmological* argument: it moves by deduction from the existence of the universe (Greek *kosmos*), to the

existence of a First Cause. Atheists are often illogical, presupposing the law of cause and effect in every day life, but denying its applicability in relation to the origin of the universe as a whole.

### **ii) The Argument from Order**

The *Teleological* argument (Greek *telos*, meaning 'end', goal or purpose) argues from the evidence of design in the universe to the existence of an Intelligent Designer. Contrary to the common assumption of evolutionary theory, chance does not explain order. Chance explains randomness and disorder, whereas order always points to a purposeful and intelligent mind. A railway station pebble garden on the English-Welsh border reading 'WELCOME TO WALES BY BRITISH RAILWAYS' indicates a thoughtful border station master, whereas chance or randomness only explains its subsequent disarrangement and loss of order. 'Randomness alone cannot produce a significant pattern.' (Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, [London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958], pp. 33-40).

### **iii) The Argument from Being**

The *Ontological* argument, from the interrelationship of thought and being (Greek *ontos*), points to the existence of a Highest or Supreme Being. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the eleventh century, defined God as the Being 'beyond which nothing greater can be conceived' (*Proslogion*, 2). He argued that the very nature of God is such that no greater being can be imagined. If the Greatest Being could be imagined as not existing, then something even greater could be imagined - a Greatest Being who truly existed, which is by definition, God. 'He could not be conceived as not existing which so truly exists that it cannot even be conceived as not existing' (*Proslogion*, 3). This Supreme Being, Anselm said, is the God whom Christians worship and pray to.

## **2. The Irrationality of Unbelief**

Reason can also be used to show the inconsistency of those who reject or redefine Christian belief in a transcendent Creator God. If faith is reasonable or rational, then unbelief is essentially foolish or irrational. According to the Bible, denial of God is not a rational thing to do, but an act of folly; it is fools who say in their hearts, 'There is no God' (Psalms 14:1, 53:1).

### **i) Naturalism is Inconsistent**

The test of consistency means a person must be willing to apply the same scrutiny to their own thinking as they apply to the thinking of others. Atheists and nonbelievers often use more stringent tests for truth against the Christian message than they do in relation to their own viewpoint. It is inconsistent to use arguments against theism that would equally undermine atheism if applied to the sceptic's case instead. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

For example, Lloyd Geering, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at Victoria University of Wellington and a well-known secularising Presbyterian minister, argues in his recent book *Tomorrow's God: How We Create Our Worlds* (Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 1994) that 'God' does not objectively exist but is simply a human construct, a symbolic expression of our ultimate values, part of the world of meaning we create for ourselves in the attempt to make sense of life. On this view 'God' is like a character in a novel, who doesn't objectively exist but is a product of author's creative imagination.

What if we were to apply this argument to him? Professor Geering does not really exist; he is just a literary construct. We have words and writings purporting to come from him, but, on his own terms, they are a linguistic and symbolic construct, and there is no reason why we should accept that they are the revelation of a real person who exists apart from and independently of them. Geering is inconsistent. Applying his critique to his own views shows that he obviously expects to be treated differently than he treats God.

### **ii) Naturalism is Self-Contradictory**

A similar example of negative apologetics is C. S. Lewis's brilliant argument about 'the self contradiction of the naturalist', in his book on miracles. I could summarise his argument like this: If naturalism is true, the universe as

a whole, and my thinking in particular, is the product of natural or irrational causes. But if my thinking is the product of irrational causes, I have no grounds for believing it to be true. Therefore, I cannot establish the case that naturalism is true.

Lewis says, 'All arguments about the validity of thought make a tacit, and illegitimate, exception in favour of the bit of thought you are doing at that moment. . . . Thus the Freudian proves that all thoughts are merely due to complexes except the thoughts which constitute this proof itself. The Marxist proves that all thoughts result from class conditioning - except the thought he is thinking while he says this.' (*Miracles* [London, Bles, 1947], p 30).

### **iii) Naturalism lacks a Basis for Moral Outrage**

One of the strongest arguments against Christian belief has been the argument from evil: how could an all-powerful and all-loving God allow the continued existence of evil and injustice in a world for which he is responsible? This argument is often adduced, despite the central tenet of the Christian message that God so loved world that he gave his only Son to enter it, experience our suffering, and die a victim of evil and injustice on the cross - precisely to overcome this sin and evil he is alleged to be indifferent to.

But Alvin Plantinga, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame and perhaps the world's leading contemporary Protestant philosopher, points out a flaw in this antitheistic argument from evil. The existence of evil, particularly of appalling human cruelty and wickedness like that displayed by Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot, can be viewed equally as contradicting naturalism and as providing evidence *for* theism.

'Could there really be any such thing as horrifying wickedness if naturalism were true? I don't see how,' answers Plantinga. 'A naturalistic way of looking at the world . . . has no place for genuine moral obligation of any sort; a fortiori, then, it has no place for such a category as horrifying wickedness. . . . There can be such a thing only if there is a way rational creatures are *supposed* to live, *obliged* to live. . . . But naturalism cannot make room for that kind of normativity; that requires a divine lawgiver, one whose very nature it is to abhor wickedness.' On a truly naturalistic view of reality such wickedness would simply have to be accepted, without demur or protest. (In Kelly James Clark, ed., *Philosophers Who Believe: the Spiritual Journeys of Eleven Leading Thinkers* [Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1993], p.73).

## **Conclusion**

Cumulatively, these two lines of rational evidence, one positive and the other negative, when weighed thoughtfully and dispassionately, point to the irrationality of atheism and the reasonableness of theism. Belief in God is supported, not undermined, by the proper use of reason and indeed by the very structure of reasoning itself.

# Someone Out There? Is There Evidence that God Exists?

Rob Yule, 2001

*Twentieth century scientific research has gathered an overwhelming body of evidence, from the origin and fine-tunedness of the universe, for the existence of an intelligent and caring God. This address by Rob Yule, minister of St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North and Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand for 2000-2002, was given at a Auckland Presbytery Youth Service at St John's Presbyterian Church, Mt Roskill, Auckland, on 27 May 2001.*

## Are We Alone in the Universe?

Are there aliens or intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe? Despite the sceptical, scientific temper of our age, people have a perennial fascination with this subject:

- The Swiss hotelier, Eric von Daniken, has made millions from books like *The Chariot of the Gods*, claiming that the 'gods' of human history were alien visitors from outer space.
- Pioneer 10, launched on 2 March 1972, the first man-made object to leave the solar system, carried a plaque for communication with intelligent beings should any be encountered on its odyssey.
- NASA has spent millions on its Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) programme - recently expanded as the High Resolution Microwave Survey (HRMS) - using the huge radio telescope at Arecibo, Puerto Rico. 'It would be nice if they sent something obvious, like the digits of pi', remarked a woman scientist on the programme (*National Geographic*, January 1994, p. 39). Former United States Senator William Proxmire said the money (US \$100 million p.a.) would be better spent looking for intelligent life in Washington!

## Evidence for a Beginning

The very nature of the universe points to the existence of a Creator. There have been persistent attempts to deny this since Aristotle in the 4th century BC put forward the view that the universe was eternal, to avoid the implication of a beginning. For if the universe has a beginning, it has a Beginner. If it has a Beginner, it is dependent, not self-sufficient; and we are accountable, not autonomous beings.

Throughout the 20th century scientific research about the origin of the universe has steadily accumulated evidence that the space-time universe did indeed have a beginning. The following are the main episodes in this dramatic story in the history of science:

### 1. Fudged Sums (1915)

Einstein's General Theory of Relativity (1915) suggested that the universe is simultaneously expanding and decelerating, as though from a giant explosion. His original equations of General Relativity imply that all matter, energy, space and time expand outwards from a single point of origin; that is, they point to an expanding universe. But Einstein's dislike of the theistic implications of a beginning point was so deeply ingrained that he introduced a 'fudge factor' into his equations (the so-called 'Cosmological Constant') to get them to yield a static, non-expanding, model of the universe.

### 2. Receding Galaxies (1929)

In 1929 the American astronomer Edwin Hubble, working on the 100 inch telescope at the Mt. Wilson observatory in California (then the largest in the world) discovered a phenomenon known as 'redshifts'. Certain galaxies appeared redder than they should be, showing that they were moving away from the observer. The clear implication was that the universe is expanding, must have come from a finite point, and had a beginning. From



That is so precise that it has been compared to throwing a dart across the entire universe and hitting the bullseye on the dartboard!

## **2. In the Galaxy-Sun-Earth-Moon System in particular**

In the last thirty five years there has been extensive research into the extremely narrow variables or parameters within which life can exist. This research has been largely carried out by atheistic scientists, like Karl Sagan, who wanted to find favourable natural conditions or habitats for the spontaneous origin of life somewhere in the universe. Here are just three examples:

### **1. Earth's distance from the sun**

If farther, Earth would be too cool for a liquid water cycle.

If closer, Earth would be too hot for a liquid water cycle.

This is what I call the 'freeze-fry factor': a change of only 2% in distance from the sun would destroy all life on earth, freezing if it was further away or evaporating if it was nearer all liquid water, without which life is physically impossible.

### **2. Earth's rotation period**

If longer, daily temperature differences would be too great

If shorter, atmospheric wind velocities would be too great

The earth's rotation period cannot be changed by more than a few percent. If the planet took too long to rotate, temperature differences between day and night would be too great for life to survive. On the other hand, if it rotated too fast, wind velocities would rise to catastrophic levels - as on the planet Jupiter where a ten hour rotation period generates winds that can reach 265 mph (425 km/h)!

### **3. Earth's protecting planet Jupiter**

If farther, Earth would be exposed to meteorite, asteroid and comet bombardment.

If closer, gravitational forces would disrupt Earth's orbit around the sun.

It has just recently been discovered that Jupiter, with its immense size, protects Earth from the kind of meteorite bombardment depicted in the film *Armageddon*. Jupiter is Earth's defender. With its great mass, 318 times greater than Earth's, and its resultant massive gravity, it intercepts asteroids and other space junk that might otherwise cross Earth's orbit and collide with our home planet as it journeys through space (Peter Ward and Donald Brownlee, *Rare Earth: Why Complex Life is Uncommon in the Universe* [New York, Copernicus, 2000], pp. 235-42). It turns out Greek that mythology was wrong. Jove does not hurl thunderbolts at us; it protects us from them!

Some 55 of these basic parameters for life support have now been discovered. Without any one of them life on Earth would be impossible. Astrophysicist Hugh Ross has calculated the probability of all 55 occurring simultaneously to be less than one in  $10^{69}$  - 'much less than one chance in one hundred billion trillion trillion trillion' that even *one* such planet would occur anywhere in the universe ('Big Bang Model Refined by Fire', in William Dembski, ed., *Mere Creation: Science, Faith and Intelligent Design* [Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1998], pp. 371-82). No one in their right mind would bet on a horse against those odds, or enter a lottery with such remote chances of winning!

## Scientist's Testimonies

Faced with such overwhelming evidence of fine-tuning in the universe many contemporary cosmologists and astrophysicists are accepting that the universe must have a designer.

Fred Hoyle, the well-known atheist astronomer, has expressed his irritation that 'a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as with chemistry and biology.' Paul Davies has been more honest in abandoning his earlier atheism, and concedes that the laws of physics 'seem themselves to be the product of exceedingly ingenious design.'

Astronomer George Greenstein says, 'As we survey all the evidence, the thought insistently arises that some supernatural agency - or, rather, Agency - must be involved. Is it possible that suddenly, without intending to, we have stumbled upon scientific proof of the existence of a Supreme Being? Was it God who stepped in and providentially crafted the cosmos for our benefit?'

Tony Rothman, a theoretical physicist, comments, 'When confronted with the order and beauty of the universe and the strange coincidences of nature, it's very tempting to take the leap of faith from science into religion. I am sure many physicists want to. I only wish they would admit it.' (Quotes from Hugh Ross, *The Creator and the Cosmos*, pp. 121-4).

## Evidence from Rebellion

Paradoxically, perhaps the greatest evidence for God's existence is provided by the continued desire of people to deny a Being to which so much rational and empirical evidence points. Genuine non-existence - like fairies, or Santa Claus, needs no comparable effort of denial. German philosopher Erich Frank rightly concludes, 'The real proof of God is the agonised attempt to deny God.' (*Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth*, [London, Oxford University Press, 1949], p. 43).

Given that the evidence for God's existence is so overwhelming, its denial must be seen as an essentially irrational phenomenon, an act of folly or rebellion, just as the Bible describes it (Psalm 14:1, 53:1, Romans 1:18-23). Denial of God usually arises from non-rational factors, as Aldous Huxley (in *Ends and Means*) once candidly admitted: 'I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning. . . . For myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political.'

All too often denial of God is not based on rational grounds, but is a rationalisation for moral disobedience. Usually, as Huxley illustrates, this is because we want sexual freedom, or power over others. How much wiser to accept the evidence for God's existence, gratefully acknowledge our Creator, and joyfully surrender our lives to his service.

# Scent of a Distant Flower - The Gospel and our Search for God

Rob Yule, 1996

*Dissatisfaction is a feature of our human condition. This message, the third in a series on 'Christian Apologetics', given at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 4 February 1996, relates this sense of unfulfilment to our basic need for God.*

## Our Need for God

Human beings are created by God, for relationship with God. The Bible affirms that we are created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). Our humanity is designed to be fulfilled by God and in relationship with God.

This means that if we live our lives without God we will be fundamentally dissatisfied, unfulfilled. Nothing created, nothing in this world, nothing transitory, can fulfil this basic need for God with which we are created, and which constitutes our humanness.

Because we are created with this fundamental need for relationship with God, the basic longing or aspiration which rises from it does not cease to exist when people turn away from God. This thirst or quest for meaning and transcendence still exists when we turn away from God, for it is a fundamental feature of our humanity. But when redirected towards created things, it reaches out to objects which by their very nature cannot satisfy it. Finite things cannot satisfy an infinite thirst. We are created with a God-shaped mesh in our hearts, and anything less than God slips through the mesh, leaving us unsatisfied.

## Unsatisfied Longing

This sense of unsatisfied longing is a characteristic of our fallen human condition. Though it is widely overlooked or suppressed in our contemporary success-oriented materialistic Western culture, it has been remarked on by thoughtful and honest people for centuries:

- The Greek philosopher Plato, in one of his dialogues, compares human beings to leaky jars, which are never totally filled (*Gorgias*, 3 b-d). We may pour many things into the container of our lives, but somehow we are never fully filled (which is the Old English derivation of the word 'fulfil'). We are always partly empty, and experience a lack of fullness or happiness.
- The late fourth century Christian theologian, Augustine, who came to God after a long search in philosophy, rhetoric, sexual experience and religion, acknowledged to God in his autobiography, the world's first: 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you' (*Confessions*, I.i.1).

## A Point of Contact

The Christian message claims to fulfil this ultimate human longing, by offering the means for restoring our relationship with God. Alister McGrath, in his book *Bridgebuilding: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Leicester, InterVarsity Press, 1992, pp. 52-3), says this feeling of dissatisfaction is 'one of the most important points of contact for gospel proclamation.' In the first place, the gospel 'interprets this vague and unshaped feeling, as a longing for God. Secondly, 'it offers to fulfil it.' McGrath says, 'There is a sense of divine dissatisfaction . . . a dissatisfaction with all that is not God, which arises from God, and which ultimately leads to God.'

McGrath's view is that this sense of unfulfilment is one of the best points of contact for presenting the Christian message to our contemporaries. Many people today live their lives in a sometimes hectic pursuit of satisfaction through pleasure, sexual encounters, money, work, educational qualifications, technology, computing, sport, entertainment, music, artistic achievement, or marginal experiences. It is my belief that there will be a growing sense of dissatisfaction as people discover that these things - some of them good in and of themselves - cannot satisfy the deepest need of our human spirit for transcendence and personal meaning. Like the television advertisements which are its symbols, our materialistic consumer culture offers us glittering dreams, but does not (and in the light of the human condition, cannot) deliver what it promises.

A good contemporary illustration of this condition of unfulfilledness is U2's song, 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For' (on their 1987 album, *The Joshua Tree*, © 1987 Blue Mountain Music & Chappell Music):

I have climbed the highest mountains  
I have run through the fields  
Only to be with you  
Only to be with you  
I have run I have crawled  
I have scaled these city walls  
Only to be with you  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for  
I have kissed honey lips  
Felt the healing in her fingertips  
It burned like fire  
This burning desire

.....

But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for  
I believe in the Kingdom Come  
Then all the colours will bleed into one  
But yes I'm still running

.....

You know I believe it  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for  
But I still haven't found  
What I'm looking for.

### **Our Search for God**

The Biblical prophet Isaiah poetically describes a number of factors which lead people to seek for God:

- **Thirst** 'Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters' (Isaiah 55:1). Longing for water speaks of an inner dryness, an emptiness within, which cries out to be quenched. The Christian message tells us that this an eternal thirst that only God can fulfil. As Jesus said to a Samaritan woman by a well, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14). In every person there is an infinite longing which Jesus, the Son of God, can fulfil.

- **Dissatisfaction** People 'spend their money for what is not bread', and 'labour for that which does not satisfy' (Isaiah 55:2). They squander their energies on things that cannot nourish them. They toil for things that do not bring satisfaction. They work for goals that do not fulfil their aspirations. They live their lives pursuing activities that cannot bring them ultimate happiness.

- **Searching** 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near' (Isaiah 55:6). People search for meaning or purpose in life. But many are searching in the wrong places. They mean well, but go astray. They follow their own ideas, they go their own way. They end up lost and disillusioned. That is why the prophet calls people to redirect their search. 'Let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord' (Isaiah 55:7). We need to bring our misdirected thoughts and aspirations to God - to the one

who knows better what is best for us, whose 'thoughts are not our thoughts' and whose 'ways are not our ways' (Isaiah 55:8-9).

- **Guilt** The prophet speaks of God's mercy and pardon. 'Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon' (Isaiah 55:7). Clearly implied here is something else that drives people to seek after God: a sense of guilt or moral failure. Guilt is an awareness that we have failed, not just to meet our personal goals in life, but to attain the moral perfection which we long for. Guilt is falling short of perfection, failing to attain God's standard of holiness. 'All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23).

### The Gospel Offer

Isaiah 55 also sets out the basic elements in the Christian message that answer to these aspects of our searching:

- **It is free** 'You that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.' (Isaiah 55:1). The Gospel is a gift of God's free, unmerited grace. It is not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is not something we deserve, or can earn. It is God's undeserved gift. It is something infinitely precious, but without price; something immensely costly, but given to us free.

- **It is satisfying** 'Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.' (Isaiah 55:2). Salvation is good. It is compared to rich food. It is pleasing and delightful. In God's presence is fullness of joy. God's eternal provision satisfies our basic hunger, quenches our deepest thirst. 'My flesh is real food,' says Jesus, and 'my blood is real drink' (John 6:55).

- **It is enduring** 'Listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant.' (Isaiah 55:3). Our feeling of unfulfilment is often because we have been let down or cheated by the transience of life's experiences. By contrast, the Gospel can offer lasting fulfilment and satisfaction because it is based on God's consistent character - his covenant faithfulness, his 'steadfast, sure love,' for his people (Isaiah 55:3). God's promises are permanent, his love is loyal, his truth trustworthy, his salvation steadfast.

- **It is abundant** If we return to him, God 'will abundantly pardon' our wrongdoings and failures (Isaiah 55:7). There is no wrong that God cannot put right. There is no failure that he cannot forgive. There is no sin that besets us that he cannot save us from. He can 'abundantly pardon'. The worst we can do he can outflank. However weighted against us the scales of justice may be, Christ's saving work on the cross far outweighs it all and tips the scales in our favour.

- **It is infinite** 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Isaiah 55:8-9). You will never get bored with God. His mind is immeasurably greater than ours, his thoughts higher than our thoughts, his ways different from our ways. There is always more of God to be discovered, and delighted in. The contemplation of God is a perpetual discovery, and that is its delight (Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God* [London, Faith Press, 1963], pp. 36, 74). His mystery is more mysterious than any human mystery, his beauty more beautiful than any earthly beauty, his glory more glorious than any created splendour.

# The Search for Truth - The Evangelistic Relevance of the Incarnation

Rob Yule, 1996

*central Christian belief is that the Son of God became a human being like us. This sermon, fourth in a series on 'Christian Apologetics', preached at an evening service in St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 11 February 1996, and published in the Christmas issue of Renewal News (Rotorua, Presbyterian Renewal Ministries), December 1996, pp. 24-26, illustrates from three distinguished writers how this belief gives meaning to life and hope amid suffering.*

## The Search for Truth

Historically, there have been two paths in the search for truth. One, represented by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, is the *theoretical* approach: the contemplation of universal ideas or forms; the search for truth in beauty, symmetry, or form. Today, this would not only be the approach of Platonist philosophers, but of pure mathematicians and theoretical physicists.

The other path, represented by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, is the *empirical* approach to truth: the examination of particular instances or facts; the search for truth by the accumulation of specific evidence or examples of general laws. Today, this is the approach of the experimental sciences.

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation affirms that these two approaches to truth are united in a person: the one who said 'I am the way and the truth and the life' (John 14:6). By declaring Jesus the Messiah of Nazareth to be 'the Word made flesh' (John 1:14), John is affirming that Jesus unites these two classical paths to truth; he fulfils and completes what is correct but incomplete in each of these approaches, by bringing them together and integrating them. Jesus Christ is the invisible Word or *Logos*, through whom everything was created and who gives form and harmony to all reality, who appeared in history as a particular, perfect human being, 'full of grace and truth,' and was seen, handled and vouched for by other human beings (cf 1 John 1:1-3).

I would like to illustrate the evangelistic and apologetic potential of the incarnation, of the Christian belief that Jesus is 'the Word become flesh,' with reference to three personal stories.

### 1. The American Philosopher Paul Elmer Moore

Oxford theologian Alister McGrath tells how Paul Elmer Moore, one of America's greatest Platonist philosophers, eventually became a Christian late in life. Moore was fascinated by the world of beautiful Platonic forms, the world of the purely ideal. But gradually, disillusionment set in. He began to experience a sense of unutterable bleakness and solitariness. He found himself driven to search for God 'by the loneliness of an Ideal world without a Lord.' He began to long for those impersonal forms to become personal - for those perfect ideals to acquire a personal face. 'My longing for some audible voice out of the infinite silence rose to a pitch of torture. To be satisfied I must see face to face, I must as it were, handle and feel - and how should this be?' (Paul Elmer Moore, *Pages from an Oxford Diary* [Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1937], Section XVIII, quoted in Alister McGrath, *Bridgebuilding: Effective Christian Apologetics* [Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1992], p. 52).

Moore found his longings satisfied in what is affirmed by the Christian doctrine of the incarnation: that Jesus Christ, the perfect Word of God, became flesh and dwelt among us. McGrath comments on the significance of Moore's experience: 'Without the incarnation, we are left in the world of ideas and ideals - a chilly world, in which no words are spoken, and the tenderness of love is unknown. The incarnation allows us to speak with authority of God being personal. It speaks of God entering into our history, and allows us to abandon the cold and unfeeling world of ideals in favour of a world charged with the thrilling personal presence of God.' (*Bridgebuilding*, p. 169). Paul Elmer Moore's experience illustrates that perfection is not an abstract ideal, but a human person, Jesus Christ.

### 2. The Russian Novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky

The great novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky grew up in a devout Russian Orthodox home, but abandoned his childhood faith at university when he became involved in an early anti-royalist revolutionary group. Arrested with a number of his fellow conspirators for plotting to overthrow Tsar Nicholas I, Dostoevsky was reprieved from death in a mock execution ordered by the Tsar himself, and exiled to Omsk, east of the Urals, to ruminate on his

life. After years of searching the prodigal publicly returned to Russian Orthodox faith of his childhood, about the time of his return to Russia from Europe in 1871.

In his notebooks preparatory to his prescient novel *The Devils* (sometimes titled *The Possessed*), which seemed to foreshadow the calamities which would befall Russia in the twentieth century, Dostoevsky indicated that his 'whole faith' and 'consolation' rested not on any 'mere daydream or ideal' but on the orthodox Christian doctrine of the incarnation :

Christ came down to earth, to tell mankind that the nature of the human spirit as they knew it might appear in such heavenly brilliance, and indeed in the flesh, and not only in a mere daydream or ideal, this being both natural as well as possible....The whole point is that the Word had truly 'been made flesh'. Therein lies the whole faith and the whole consolation of mankind. (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Notebooks for the Possessed*, ed. E. Waisolek, trans. V. Terras [Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1968], February 1870, p. 147).

The reference to the nature of our human spirit appearing in heavenly brilliance is an allusion to the transfiguration of Jesus, a central theme in Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which sees the transfiguration as the occasion in Jesus' life when our humanity, humanity 'as we know it', was glorified or irradiated with divine splendour. The transfiguration of Jesus' humanity, according to historic Christian belief, prefigures our own human destiny or beatitude. 'What we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' (1 John 3:2).

Dostoevsky's view that the incarnation is both the present consolation and future fulfilment of our humanity appears in two other variants in the same notebooks, dated June 1870:

(1) ' . . . peace of mind, source of life for every man, the salvation of all men from despair . . . and the guarantee for the existence of the whole world, are all contained in these words: *And the Word was made flesh*, and in faith in these words.'

(2) 'It isn't Christ's morality, or his teaching, that will save the world, but faith, and nothing else, faith in the fact that the Word was made flesh. . . . What one must believe in is precisely the notion that this is the ultimate ideal of man, the Word all incarnate, God incarnate.' (*Notebooks for the Possessed*, pp. 238 & 252-3 respectively).

The first extract makes the point that God's dwelling among us in our humanity is what gives meaning to our present earthly life. The second points to the Word made flesh being the 'ultimate ideal,' pattern, or measure of what is human; the foreshadowing of our destiny and prototype of what we are yet to become.

### **3. The New Zealand Poet James K. Baxter**

A further implication of the incarnation is that it assures us of God's love for us human beings in our actual life situations. God does not deal with us by remote or 'from a distance,' as the popular song has it, but shows his willingness to come among us and associate with us - experiencing our life, walking our roads, fishing our lakes, enduring our weaknesses, bearing our sufferings, and suffering our injustices.

When I was studying theology and training for the ministry in Dunedin from 1966 to 1968, New Zealand's best-known and most prolific poet, James K. Baxter, was Burns Fellow at Otago University. Those were the years of theological controversy occasioned by the denial by my Old Testament Professor, Lloyd Geering, of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. For Geering the incarnation and resurrection were not real events, just symbolic ways of describing the impact Jesus had on his contemporaries. (Why earthy Galilean fishermen felt the need to invent such symbols to describe his impact on them in the first place, was never satisfactorily explained to us.)

Baxter published a satirical poem in the Otago University student paper in 1967, challenging Geering's views. Sadly I have lost my copy of the poem, but it was memorable enough for me still to recall some of its lines. The gist of it was that if the good Lord didn't have a real body, and mix it with real men, he (Baxter) would 'give the lot for a jug of beer /and a couple of station pies.' The poem concluded:

*The good Lord walked with real men  
And showed to them his glory*

*In spite of Doctor Geering  
And Canon Montefiore.*

The award of a doctorate to Geering was premature, and modernization of the railway system has eliminated station pies, but Baxter's point was well made. Like St Paul, who said we might as well eat, drink, be merry and make the most of this life if Jesus did not really rise from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:32), Baxter saw that the relevance of the Christian message rests on the reality of the incarnation. God so loved the world that he did not become a theologian, but gave his only Son to share fully in our humanity, to genuinely experience our sufferings, to bear our sins truly in his own body, and really to die for us on the cross.

Baxter, an alcoholic who candidly acknowledged himself to be a 'gloomy drunk' (*Autumn Testament* [Wellington, Price Milburn, 1972], p. 4), held to the Orthodox Christian understanding of the incarnation, because it affirmed the reality of God's love for real human beings like him, in all the reality of their sufferings and their struggles. In *Autumn Testament* (p. 24), the last collection of writings he prepared for publication before his death, Baxter wrote:

*King Jesus, after a day or a week of bitching  
I come back always to your bread and salt,  
Because no other man, no other God,  
Suffered our pains with us minute by minute  
And asked us to die with him.*

If Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God in human flesh, it makes an enormous difference to how we cope with the evil that human beings do to each other. It means the Son of God himself has endured persecution, perversion of justice, torture, abuse, sadism, and execution. So no human being, however victimised, can claim that God does not care about them.

Only a fully orthodox doctrine of the incarnation, which affirms that God has genuinely entered into our human experience, can show itself relevant to a century which has experienced unimaginable horrors of human suffering: in the muddy trenches of the Somme, the clinical extermination camps of Auschwitz and Majdanek, the bleak forced labour camps of Stalin's Gulag, or the genocidal horrors of the Khmer Rouge's Year Zero. 'An incarnational theology speaks of God subjecting himself to the evil and pain of the world at its worst, in the grim scene of Calvary,' says Alister McGrath. 'God suffered in Christ, taking upon himself the agony of the world which he created.' (*op. cit.*, p. 173).

Christmas is far more than the sentimental event of a baby's birth. It represents God's identification with our humanity in the profoundest degree, giving meaning to human life and hope amid our darkest sorrow.

# Where Is God When it Hurts? Human Suffering and the Death of Jesus

Rob Yule, 1999

*Suffering is not just an intellectual difficulty for faith in God. It is a tragic, cruel and intensely personal reality in human experience. In this message, given at a combined churches' Good Friday service on 2 April 1999, Rob Yule, minister of St Alban's Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, discusses the problem of suffering in the light of Jesus' crucifixion and what it reveals of God's solidarity with all who suffer.*

James Emery White, senior pastor of the Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, was in New Zealand recently for a Willow Creek Association seminar on helping seekers find God. He tells in his book *A Search for the Spiritual* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 1998, p. 83), about one of the most difficult tasks he has ever been called on to perform, which took place during his seminary training, while pastoring a church near Louisville, Kentucky:

A deacon in the church called me at home and told me the wife of his next-door neighbour had just committed suicide. She was the mother of five girls. Her youngest daughter had found her. He said, 'Would you come?' When I arrived, I saw the five daughters and their father huddled in a corner of the house. I thought to myself, *What am I doing here? What could I possibly say? What can I do that would help at this moment?* I went over to the family, introduced myself, and said the only words I can think of: 'I just want you to know that I'm sorry. I'm so very, very sorry.'

The girl who had found her mother looked up at me and said, 'Would you pray for us?' So I prayed. I don't remember a single word of that prayer, but when I finished, that little girl looked up at me and simply said, 'God's here, isn't he?'

And I said, 'Yes, he is.'

She said, 'I thought so. I could feel him hugging me when you prayed. It's going to be all right, isn't it?'

And I said, 'Yes honey, it's going to be hard, but it's going to be all right.'

## God's Here, Isn't He?

'God's here, isn't he?' That poor little girl's words could easily be dismissed as wishful thinking in a tragic situation. The pastor's agreeing with her could be viewed as just reassuring words of comfort. Suffering is terrible, and inexplicable. When we suffer like this, God seems to take a holiday. But the Bible supports the little girl's view. God is here when it hurts.

Jesus was crucified between two criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Their reaction to their situation is typical of people's response to cruelty and suffering (Luke 23:39-43).

One criminal kept taunting and deriding Jesus, saying, 'Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' He reacted negatively to his sufferings, blaspheming and blaming God for them. He is typical of those God deniers - like Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (V, 4) - who make suffering a reason for rejecting God. Even though he showed no reverence for God, he demanded that God do something to relieve his suffering and show that he was worthy of belief.

The other criminal showed a different response. He rebuked his companion in crime and said, 'Don't you fear God, since you're under the same sentence of condemnation?' He showed a humbler attitude, an acceptance of his just deserts, an awareness that his own wrongdoing has something to do with the evil in the world. He said to the other criminal, 'We indeed have been condemned justly, for we're getting what we deserve for our deeds. But this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

This stark story of people in their death throes sheds light on the age-old question, 'Where is God when it hurts?' The truth is, God was right there when it hurt. The cross of Jesus, God's Son, was right there in the midst of that scene, between the two criminals. He suffered with them. But not all people recognise where God is when they suffer. Like the blaspheming criminal, many blame God for their sufferings. They rant and rave, swear and curse, taking it out on God - even though, frequently, they don't even believe in God. They reject God as unworthy of belief: as unjust, uncaring, and powerless to help.

But the other criminal shows a different attitude to suffering. Most people, when they prosper, turn away from God. But when they suffer, they turn to God. Suffering, as C. S. Lewis put it in *The Problem of Pain* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1940, p. 81), is God's 'megaphone to rouse a deaf world.' So this criminal accepts responsibility for his situation, sees God in the midst of his sufferings, and turns to God for help and mercy. 'Jesus,' he cries in his agony, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Jesus' response shows that when we recognise God in our suffering, he will receive us in his glory. 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'

### **Here on this Gallows**

Elie Wiesel is a Holocaust survivor and an internationally acclaimed author. A Romanian-born Jew, he describes in his first book *Night* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1981), how he was taken to the death camps in the spring of 1944 at the age of only fourteen, along with all the Jews of his community. They travelled by train for three days, eighty people in each cattle truck. On arrival at Auschwitz, the men and women were segregated, and Elie never saw his mother or sister again:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke.... Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith for ever.... Never shall I forget those flames which murdered my God and my soul, and turned my dreams to dust.... (p.45)

One of Wiesel's most horrifying memories was when the guards first tortured and then hanged a young Jewish boy, 'a child with a refined and beautiful face', a 'sad-eyed angel'. Just before the hanging Elie heard someone behind him whisper, 'Where is God? Where is he?' Thousands of prisoners were forced to watch the hanging - it took the boy half an hour to die - and then to march past, looking the corpse full in the face. Behind him Elie heard the same voice ask, 'Where is God now?' Wiesel writes, 'And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is he? Here he is - he is hanging here on this gallows."' (*Night*, pp. 75-77).

Wiesel meant to imply that God was dead, powerless to help. As a result of his experience of the Holocaust he rebelled against God for allowing people to be starved, tortured, butchered, gassed, burned. But Wiesel's words have another meaning, a meaning he never intended. Where is God when it hurts? Here he is - hanging here on this gallows. When applied to the cross of Jesus Wiesel's words are truer than he realised. Where was God when Jesus died a cruel, shameful death? Another Jew, the apostle Paul, says God was there. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.' (2 Corinthians 5:19).

### **God With Us**

The Bible not only says that God suffered in Christ. It says that God in Christ suffers with his people still. God is not far away when it hurts. He is right there, in the midst of his people's suffering.

- During Israel's four hundred and fifty years of forced labour in Egypt, God heard their groaning and was distressed at their distress. 'The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he . . . looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.' (Exodus 2:23-25). God, as Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel says, 'is involved in history. He is engaged to Israel - and has a stake in its destiny. Man . . . is a perpetual concern of God.' (*The Prophets*, Vol. 2 [New York, Harper & Row, 1975], p. 6).

- When Saul of Tarsus, later known as Paul, was converted, the voice of the risen Jesus spoke to him in a vision, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' was Jesus' reply (Acts 9:4-5). In these words, Jesus completely identifies with the sufferings of his persecuted followers. This is an enormous comfort to Christians who are persecuted for their faith, like in Indonesia, southern Sudan, and some other Islamic societies today. Jesus is there, in their hurts.

• Most clearly of all, Jesus said that when we minister to the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the prisoner, we are ministering to him. Jesus identifies himself with all needy and suffering people in the world. 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:34-40). Jesus truly is 'Emmanuel', 'God with us' (Matthew 1:23). Even in the worst situations of cruelty, abuse, rape, sadism, torture, expulsions, genocide, he shares and understands our situation and our sufferings.

As New Zealand poet James K. Baxter wrote in *Autumn Testament* (Wellington, Price Milburn, 1972, p. 24):

King Jesus, after a day or a week of bitching  
I come back always to your bread and salt,

Because no other man, no other God,  
Suffered our pains with us minute by minute

And asked us to die with him.

English Christian leader John Stott testifies, 'I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the One Nietzsche ridiculed as "God on the cross". In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?'

Stott describes the statue of the Buddha he has seen while visiting Buddhist temples in Asian countries, 'his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agonies of the world.' He contrasts this image of detached serenity with 'that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God forsaken darkness.'

'That is the God for me!' says Stott. 'He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us.' (*The Cross of Christ* [Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1986], pp. 335-6).

### **Sentenced to Suffer**

Where is God when it hurts? There is an imaginative piece named 'The Long Silence' which sums up the issue powerfully (Stott, *op. cit.*, pp.336-7):

At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a great plain before God's throne.

Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly - not with cringing shame, but with belligerence.

'Can God judge us? How can he know about suffering?' snapped a pert young brunette. She ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. 'We endured terror . . . beatings . . . torture . . . death!'

In another group a Negro boy lowered his collar. 'What about this?' he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. 'Lynched . . . for no crime but being black!'

In another crowd, a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. 'Why should I suffer' she murmured, 'It wasn't my fault.'

Far out a cross the plain there were hundreds of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering he permitted in his world. How lucky God was to live in heaven where all was sweetness and light, where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that human beings had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said.

So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a Negro, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child. In the centre of the plain they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever.

Before God could be qualified to be their judge, he must endure what they had endured. Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth - as a human being!

'Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted. Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind when he tries to do it. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge. Let him be tortured.

'At last, let him see what it means to be terribly alone. Then let him die. Let him die so that there can be no doubt that he died. Let there be a great host of witnesses to verify it.'

As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

And when the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence. No-one uttered another word. No-one moved. For suddenly all knew that God had already served his sentence.

# The Phoenix and the Butterfly - Human Longings for the Resurrection

Rob Yule, 1996

*The desire for immortality is a universal human longing. This message, sixth in a series on 'Christian Apologetics', given at St. Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 18 February 1996, relates these longings to the central Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead. Analogies in nature help us understand the glorious transformation that awaits us in the resurrection.*

## The Frescoes of Knossos

Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek novelist, tells in his autobiographical work *Report to Greco* (London, Cassirer, 1960), about growing up on the island of Crete, situated in the Mediterranean Sea between three continents, Asia, Africa and Europe. As a child he used to play among and explore the ruins of the ancient Bronze-Age Minoan civilization at Knossos. He was fascinated by the shapes he found inscribed on the wall-frescoes of the ancient ruins: drawings of flying fish, silk worms, and butterflies. He often pondered their meaning:

- The flying fish, which for a brief moment of heroic endeavour, leaps out of its native environment, the ocean, and becomes airborne, transcending itself, as if aspiring to a higher, freer existence.
- The silkworm, which spins a cocoon of silk out of its own body, a single thread up to a thousand metres long, its great life's work being to weave its own coffin before it climbs into it and dies, 'taking up its cross' as it were, as it follows some mysterious urge to die to itself, develop wings, and fly.
- The butterfly, glorious metamorphosis of the humble caterpillar, a mere grub which spreads its wings and becomes a creature of splendour in its next existence.

Here - in the ruins of the earliest recorded civilization in Europe - are expressed human longings for transcendence and immortality.

## The Myth of the Phoenix

The phoenix was a fabulous mythical Arabian bird, said to be as large as an eagle, with brilliant scarlet and gold plumage and a melodious cry. It was said that only one phoenix existed at any one time, and it was very long-lived - no ancient sources gave it a life-span less than 500 years. As its end approached, the phoenix made a nest of aromatic branches and spices, set it on fire, and was consumed in the flames. From the ashes (according to some sources, from the midst of the flames) miraculously sprang a new phoenix.

The ancient Egyptians linked the myth of the phoenix with the longings for immortality that were so strong in their civilization, and from there its symbolism spread around the Mediterranean world of late antiquity. At the close of the first century Clement of Rome became the first Christian to interpret the myth of the phoenix as an allegory of the resurrection and of life after death. The phoenix was also compared to undying Rome, and it appears on the coinage of the late Roman Empire as a symbol of the Eternal City. (It was the sack of Rome by Alaric the Goth in 410 that led Augustine to write his *City of God*, in which he transferred the theme of the Eternal City to the Kingdom of God.)

## Paul's Analogy of the Seed

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15, uses another analogy, that of a seed sowed in the ground, to make belief in the resurrection understandable to the sceptical among his readers. 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' 'A senseless question!' is how the New English Bible translates Paul's response. Paul suggests his opponent is thoughtless and unimaginative in not paying attention to the evidence around him in the world of nature: 'What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain' (1 Corinthians 15:36-37).

Jesus had used the same analogy, and interestingly enough, it was to explain the resurrection not to his fellow Jews, but to inquiring Greeks: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains just a single

grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12 :24). Jesus' emphasis is on the death: for there to be a harvest, the seed must be sown and die. 'Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life' (John 12:25).

In contrast, Paul's emphasis is on the transformation brought about by the resurrection: the harvest to come is much greater than the seed which is planted. 'What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.'(1 Corinthians 15:42-44). The body that dies and is buried is a mortal body, with a dependent or created life. The body to be raised will be made alive with the life of the Spirit, a life that is divine or uncreated, an undying life.

### **The Limits and Uses of Analogy**

As with Jesus' parables, analogies from nature can help us grasp spiritual truth, provided we recognize the main point of comparison and are aware that all analogies have their limitations:

- The myth of the phoenix emphasizes *continuity* rather than change in the resurrection state: the mythical bird that rises in the ashes is the same one that perished in the flames. There will be a continuity of personal identity between our present life and the life to come.
- The image of the flying fish emphasizes *difference* more than continuity in the next life: in leaping out of the water, it seeks to transcend its native environment and enter an altogether new one. In the life to come we will experience an exhilarating freedom which far transcends the limitations of this present mortal life.
- The metaphor of the seed, and perhaps even more adequately the analogies of the silkworm and the butterfly, convey both the continuity and discontinuity between our present life and the life to come, with the accent falling on the *change* or metamorphosis which occurs: the lowly seed becomes a golden harvest, the humble caterpillar is transformed into a glorious butterfly. 'I tell you a mystery,' says the apostle Paul: 'we will all be changed. . . . For . . . the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.' (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

The world of nature points beyond itself to the spiritual realm. 'The spiritual did not come first,' says Paul, 'but the natural, and after that the spiritual.' (1 Corinthians 15:46). These analogies from the natural world point to the great transformation of our human existence that will come when we are raised from the dead. Such intimations of immortality and prefigurings of resurrection can aid our understanding and inspire our longing for the glorious transformation that one day awaits the believer in Jesus, whose resurrection foreshadows our own resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). Like the picture of the grain of wheat which must die before there can be a harvest, which Jesus shared with the Greeks who came to talk to him, these analogies can help our contemporaries make connections with this most vital, central element in the Christian message: the resurrection of the body.